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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence Memorandum

*Communist Military Build-up in the
Central Highlands of South Vietnam*

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
5 January 1972

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Communist Military Build-up in the
Central Highlands of South Vietnam

Introduction

Hanoi is increasing the size and improving the firepower of its ground forces in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam. The unusually large number of troops and the heavy artillery it sent there last summer have recently been augmented by the dispatch of additional combat units, including the 320th Infantry Division.

Integration of the new personnel, equipment, and combat units into the Communist B-3 Front, which should be completed early this year, could more than double the size of the enemy combat forces in the area. For the past few years, the B-3 Front has controlled several infantry and artillery regiments with a combined strength of approximately 10,000 troops. If all of the forces that now appear to be headed for the highlands arrive on schedule, this strength will increase to about 25,000 men. The Communists will have at their disposal as many as eight infantry regiments and one or more artillery regiments, plus a number of smaller units. With these forces, the Communists should be able to protect their base areas more effectively and counter South Vietnamese attacks against the vital north-south infiltration pipeline to the west. These forces will also improve the Communists' ability to launch and sustain large-scale attacks against South Vietnamese positions in the highlands. Moreover, the B-3 Front would be able to provide greater combat support to areas near the tri-border in southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia without weakening its military position in the highlands.

Note: This memorandum was prepared by the Office of Current Intelligence and coordinated within CIA.

Rainy Season Infiltration to the Highlands

1. The Communists apparently began the drive to strengthen the B-3 Front in the spring of 1971, shortly after the South Vietnamese incursion into the Tchepone area of Laos (Operation Lam Son 719) had ended. From mid-April to early June, Hanoi sent about 8,000 troops to the highlands, raising the total for the nine months since September 1970 to some 14,500. This was the heaviest infiltration to the highlands in more than three years and almost certainly exceeded replacement requirements.

2. The movement of large numbers of troops through the infiltration pipeline well into the rainy season last June was unusual, but more striking was the dispatch of large artillery pieces at a time when muddy roads made movement extremely difficult.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] low-level photography north of Tchepone revealed that at least one group was traveling with 85-mm. antiaircraft artillery. With the arrival of the artillerymen and new equipment in the highlands, the Communists could have either reinforced their artillery and AAA units or established new units. There is as yet no evidence of new units.

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4. The 85-mm. AAA weapon was probably sent along to protect the field guns from Allied bombing. The 85-mm. gives the North Vietnamese a much better capability against high-flying aircraft than the lighter AAA weapons already in the highlands. Often in the past--most recently in northern Laos earlier this dry season--an improvement in air defenses has preceded offensive action.

Dry Season Infiltration

5. Almost 40 infiltration groups--more than 18,000 men--have set out for the B-3 front since the 1971-72 dry season began. These groups include the North Vietnamese 320th Infantry Division, probably an additional infantry regiment, and two other combat units of unknown size. The deployment of this many troops to the B-3 Front so early in the dry season is unprecedented. At the current rate of movement, all of these troops will arrive in base areas along the South Vietnamese border by early 1972.

Government Forces

6. South Vietnamese regular forces in Military Region 2, which includes the highlands, consist of two infantry divisions with eight regiments and about 15 ranger battalions. The total number of men is about 35,000. About one third of these forces, including two regiments of the 22nd Division, are stationed in the highlands. The other two regiments of the 22nd are located in the coastal lowlands. The other division in the Military Region, the 23rd, is scattered in largely unpopulated areas.

7. Government forces in the highlands have long been weak. They managed to cope with two determined sieges against remote outposts in the

highlands last spring, however, and there has been further improvement in the performance of the regular units this year. They recently have launched a 21-battalion task force in an operation against Communist base sanctuaries along the border in Cambodia. The size of the effort indicates an increase in South Vietnamese capabilities, though the results of this operation have not been outstanding so far.

8. If the Communists elect to launch a larger winter-spring offensive than in the past, it may be necessary to supplement these government forces. Some South Vietnamese paratroopers, in fact, have already pulled out of the Krek area of Cambodia and, according to the press, are being sent to the highlands. Part of the 23rd Division probably could be shifted into the highlands, but the two regiments of the 22nd Division are needed along the coast. Additional units could be drawn from reserve forces in Military Region 3 to the south.

Behind the Communist Build-up

9. The growth in the combat strength of the B-3 Front may have been triggered by Communist fears that the South Vietnamese might mount an attack--either from the highlands themselves or from the western part of Military Region 1--on the vital infiltration corridors to the west.

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Hanoi may have reasoned that a substantial Communist build-up at one point near the corridor would lead the South Vietnamese to be more cautious all along the line. The build-up may have been dictated by the expansion since mid-1970 of the B-3 Front's area of operations in southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia.

10. The build-up significantly increases Communist offensive capabilities in southern Laos and in nearby South Vietnam. Whether the Communists actually use these troops to mount an offensive will depend at least in part on their final estimate of the South Vietnamese threat to the infiltration corridor. But there are a number of reasons why they might now believe a larger scale military effort in the highlands is worth the high price they undoubtedly would have to pay.

11. In each of the past few years the Communists have tried, with little success, to inflict a significant setback on the South Vietnamese and expand their control of the highlands. They may now believe that the US withdrawal has progressed to the point where a more vigorous challenge of government forces would yield greater results. Since Operation Lam Son 719 and the South Vietnamese setback at Snuol, Communist military commentary has from time to time played on the theme that "big-unit" battles will be eventually necessary to defeat the South Vietnamese Army. This refrain has been a bit more audible in recent weeks. A clear Communist victory over a major South Vietnamese unit, even if the North Vietnamese could not hold any territory they gained, would have a deleterious effect on the security situation in the coastal provinces, already among the most unstable in the country. It might also--as Communist propaganda boasts--have a serious impact on the self-confidence of all government forces.

12. Hanoi may see other good reasons for stepping up military activity in the highlands. At the least, the Communists could expect to tie down a large number of South Vietnamese troops, troops that otherwise could be used to threaten the supply corridors or shield the pacification program. Moreover, the Communists probably believe that the situation on the eve of President Nixon's trips to Peking and Moscow and at the beginning of the US presidential primary season makes some sort of attention-getting military action especially attractive. Hanoi probably believes that successful action against South Vietnamese troops will remind its allies that it still calls the tune in Vietnam, embarrass the President and the Vietnamization policy, and, hopefully, strengthen its hand at the negotiations table. If the Communists do decide to make a major military effort in South Vietnam in the next month or so, they may estimate that the balance of forces will be more favorable to them in the highlands than anywhere else.